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ABSTRACT

The research analyzed data sets covering 1981-1985 enrollments, transfers, and withdrawals at two large urban high schools (called Urbana and Northern) in eastern Massachusetts and personal interviews with selected school administrators in four school districts to investigate high dropout rates among Hispanics. Findings indicated that 30% of the 861 freshmen who entered Urbana in 1981 withdrew before that class graduated in June 1985, with 30-50% leaving before the end of their freshman year. Of 179 confirmed dropouts and 86 long-term absent students at Northern between September 1985 and February 1986, 58% were Hispanic. According to student records, 63% "left to seek employment," 33% left for unknown reasons, and only 8 left for school-related reasons dealing with grades, curriculum, and relationships with teachers/peers. Equal numbers of boys and girls withdrew from school and pregnancy or marriage was listed for only 4 Urbana dropouts. Gross dropout figures miss students who do not return following summer vacations or become "inactive." The study concluded that better recordkeeping is necessary for further research and intervention efforts. Centralized registration procedures, parent liaisons, and strong central administrative support for bilingual services have helped Northern do a better job of dropout intervention. (NEC)

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OBSTACLES TO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION
THE CASE OF HISPANICS

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Educational reform and academic excellence have become the bywords of the 1980's. As national and regional policy makers implement more comprehensive and demanding standards of academic achievement, one can ask what will happen to so called marginal students. Will they have the necessary classroom opportunities and learning experiences to successfully meet or surpass the proposed standards? Or, will they join the rising number of young people who withdraw before high school graduation? If the latter result occurs, recent efforts toward educational reform will have exacerbated the already serious school dropout problem.

Many urban high schools have experienced dropout rates of 40 to 50 percent (Ford Foundation Letter, 1984). Many of these early leavers belong to a racial or ethnic minority. For example, the National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics (1984;1,23) reported that dropout rates among Hispanic high school students reached 80% in New York City, 70% in Chicago, and 50% in Los Angeles.

Such high rates are a personal and national tragedy. On a personal level individuals without a high school diploma are twice as likely as graduates to be unemployed (Bachman, O'Malley, and Johnston 1978). For the nation, this means a major impediment to economic growth. The President's Commission on Industrial Competitiveness noted that blacks and Hispanics are 'the fastest-growing segment of the young worker population' and are 'the most likely to drop out of school and enter the workforce without critical basic skills' (Educational Week, March 13, 1985: 14).

Hispanics seem to encounter the most difficulties hurdles before graduationg from high school. Students of S]anish origins drop out at 1.5 to 2 times the rate of other groups even among those of non-English language dominance such as Southeast Asians (Steinberg, Blinde, and Chan, 1984).

this finding are clouded by the compounding influences of length of U.S. residency (e.g. recent arrival versus second generation American) and socioeconomic status. The following questions may help future research to disentangle such factors:

> Why do Hispanics, who have English as a second language, have a higher dropout rate than others without English dominance?
> Do economic adversity or personal difficulties, e.g. teenage pregnancy, more frequently prompt Hispanics to withdraw from school than non-Hispanics facing similar problems?
> Or, are there in-school factors, which operate alone or in conjunction with background variables, to produce this result?

These questions were the bases for conducting the present study. Of course, they only can be addressed if school district data can identify who dropped out before high school graduation. In reality, urban high schools often have inadequate procedures for keeping track of all enrollees. The implication of this finding will be discussed after we have defined dropout, presented an heuristic explanatory model, and described pertinent variable indicators.

Dropouts and School Retention

School dropouts can be viewed in several different ways. They may be "the proportion of a given group not enrolled in school and not high school graduates" (Waggoner, 1984: II, 103). The focus here is upon the individuals who did not graduate.

An alternative approach emphasizes the power of schools to attract and retain students. From this viewpoint, dropouts are those non-transferring

students who withdrew from school before graduation. In other words, the school's loss of pupils is the central concern.

By viewing individual decisions to leave within specific school settings, we combine these perspectives on the problem.

Causes and Correlates of dropping out

Figure 1 is an heuristic model suggesting a network of causes and correlates of dropping out before high school graduation. Three major

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Figure 1 About Here

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sets of variables are presented. First, there are individual background variables. Poor English proficiency, Hipanic origins, and low socioeconomic status appear to increase the frequency of premature school-leaving (Steinberg, Blinde, and Chan; 1984). However, the independent contribution of each variable is unknown. It may be that socioeconomic status rather than Hispanic origins is the dominant factor. The educational literature shows that 25 to 50% of pupils from the lowest economic strata drop out compared to less than 5% of their peers from the most affluent homes (Bachman, Green, Wirtanen, 1971; Cervantes, 1965).

A second set of variables in the model are called "precipitators" of dropping out. Although frequently considered as causes, poor academic performance, hostile or indifferent attitudes toward school, and disruptive or delinquent behavior are viewed here as symptomatic of deeper personal, family

or school-related problems.

We know that at least half of all dropouts have academic averages of "D" or lower and have repeated a grade (Bachman, Green, and Wirtanen, 1971; Austin Independent School District 1982; and Los Angeles Unified School District 1974). Frequently, chronic absenteeism accompanies this poor academic record.

Such performance is likely correlated with general disinterest or, perhaps, hostility toward school. "Bored with school" and "disliked school" are the most frequent reasons given by dropouts for their decision to leave (Rock, Ekstrom, Goertz, and Pollack, 1985; Rumberger, 1983; and Greater Lowell Council for Children, 1975). Such boredom and hostility also can generate disruptive or even delinquent behavior (Elliott and Voss, 1974). The resulting suspension from school then becomes a precipitator of dropping out.

A major thrust of the present research is that school induced factors operate as intervening variables which can lessen or intensify individual predispositions to withdraw before high school graduation. Specifically, students placed in remedial instructional tracks are more likely to encounter low teacher expectations of academic success. Moreover, such tracks provide opportunities for peer friendships with negative school norms to emerge among similarly placed students. There becomes, in effect, little to attract or bind individuals to school. The lack of extra-curricular activities is an additional loosening factor.

Available research has not addressed all the components of the foregoing propositions. Rather studies of academic tracking and of dropout intervention programs provide plausibility to our theoretical model.

With respect to tracking, teachers attribute higher pupil motivation and derive greater personal satisfaction with bright pupils in advanced courses

(Finley, 1984). Since the majority of these students want to attend college, their efforts can pay off in terms of needed grades and recommendations. Conversely, a remedial or low-ability, general education class is less rewarding and motivating for both instructors and learners.

Although, pupil assignment to a general education track and to low ability classes cannot be shown conclusively to cause premature withdrawal from school, there is considerable circumstantial evidence to that effect. Dropouts largely populate general or vocational programs (Steinberg, Blinde, and Chan, 1984). With respect to Hispanics 40% are in general education and 35% in vocational education. (National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics, 1984). These same students are likely to experience low standards of performance (McDill, Natriello, and Pallas, 1985). Interestingly enough, such low demands are correlated with high levels of pupil absenteeism, one of the precipitators of dropping out.

In short, academic placement of students tends to establish a syndrome of failure which is particularly burdensome for language minority youth.

Peer friendships and interests may fill a perceived void in relationships with school staff. Wehlage (1983) identified 30 students at Thoreau High who preferred drugs, parties and getting "high" to the indifferent treatment of many teachers. Basically they did not belong to the school so they developed their own norms and activities. Yet, we know that social bonds to the school and its mission are necessary for successful performance.

Extra curricula activities are an alternative vehicle to attract student support for at least the social amenities of attending school. Yet, dropouts rarely involve themselves in extra curricular activities (Bachman, 1978;

Cervantes, 1965; National School Public Relations Association, 1972).

Educational reports on dropout intervention programs show that the presence and assistance of caring adults can make a difference in student destination. Our review of such programs buttress the call of the National Commission of Secondary Education for Hispanics (1984) that school staff - teachers, guidance counselors, administrators etc. - provide close supportive relationships. Small classes with lots of teacher acceptance of and support for student efforts are essential ingredients to successful dropout intervention programs. Such positive reinforced learning is unlikely to occur in a large, impersonal, culturally diverse high school.

We shall consider the possibility that alternative school structures, e.g. a house system, and support services, e.g. guidance, bilingual education, etc.can reduce the harmful effects of size and impersonality. These structures and services can be a bridge between the language minority's culture and that of the host institution. They also can give students a sense of belonging, an indispensable tonic to stay in school.

Method

The research reported here is the beginning of a long term project to investigate and to intervene into the school dropout syndrome. Most studies and intervention programs are directed at high school youth. Yet, we know that prior academic and social experiences can predispose so-called marginal students to leave before graduation. With this in mind we have launched a six year study of selected 7th and 8th graders who should graduate from high school in 1990-91. They currently attend a large, culturally diverse school in Eastern Massachusetts.

Before initiating this project, we contacted regional school districts and sought their appraisal of the problem. In this process, we obtained large data sets covering the 1981-1985 enrollments, transfers, and withdrawals at a large (i.e. 2,500+) urban high school called Urbana High. The objective was to link and analyze four years of data for a single class. The problems encounterd in this endeavor are reflective of the anonymity experienced by many school dropouts.

We originally planned to analyze student data from three urban high schools. Unfortunately, we encountered several obstacles in accesseing and linking student records. Consequently, the 1981-85 file for Urbana High and current (i.e. 1985-86) data from another school named Northern High were used. More than half of Northern's 1800 pupils are Hispanic while Southeast Asians are the largest minority at Urbana.

Comparable data theoretically could be obtained for each school. The Massachusetts Department of Education requires school districts to record attendance, transfer, and withdrawal (including the reasons for such withdrawal) of students. Information on academic level and performance (e.g. credits, GPA, rank etc.), native language, English fluency, and minority status also are entered in computerized or written form on student files.

In reality, significant gaps in record keeping procedures are evident in the larger, culturally diverse schools. During the last few years, key administrators in Northern and Urbana's districts have worked to improve their methods of registering students and recording absentees and withdrawals. However, as we shall see, language minority youth can easily disappear from the rolls.

This paper goes beyond analysis of the two data sets and explores a

more basic question. What do school districts know about the whereabouts of non-attending but previously registered students, especially Hispanics and other minorities? To answer this question, personal interviews were conducted with selected administrators in four Eastern Massachusetts school districts. Individuals responsible for registration and attendance records were the principal interviewees. In three instances the high school principal shared his information and views on the dropout problem. Additionally, Bilingual specialists at Northern and Urbana were interviewed.

After asking these administrators for information about the characteristics and rates of school withdrawal, we inquired into district policies for identifying and recording long-term absentees or potential dropouts. In addition, we investigated practices of contacting excessively absent students. Who was responsible for this and what steps were taken to locate withdrawals? A closely related question dealt with the handling of transferees or others who left and did not return to school after summer vacation. How were such individuals identified?

With respect to bilingual services, we asked how English as a second language students were referred, tested, and placed in classes? Follow-up probes were pursued throughout the interviews.

In short, preliminary analysis of 1981-85 data from one high school class and the interviews with knowledgeable administrators in four districts provide a clear picture of findings awaiting further investigation.

Results

Of the 861 Freshmen who entered Urbana high shcool in September 1981, approximately 50% graduated in June 1985 while 20% transferred elsewhere and 30% withdrew from this class. About 3% of the school leavers later entered

other graduating classes or joined a GED program in Urbana. These gross figures disguise some important facts.

First, one third to one half of school dropouts leave before the end of freshman year. This finding can be derived from Urbana's records as well as the less complete data from other districts. For example, Northern High had 179 confirmed dropouts and 86 "inactive" (long term absent) students during September 1985 to February 1986. Sixty-two percent of these individuals left as freshmen and 58% were Hispanic. This means that research and intervention should begin before sophomore year.

Second, gross dropout figures may miss what one principal called his MIA's. The whereabouts of these individuals is simply unknown. Especially vulnerable are students who do not return following a summer vacation. Unless they transferred to another school and their request for transcripts was received and recorded, their status often remained unknown. One attendance officer and overworked school administrators did not reach many of the 250+ non-returning Urbana pupils. Until recently, Urbana periodically purged such names from current computer records. To complicate matters, the ID of the departing student often was reassigned to an entering transferee.

It's no wonder that Urbana's principal "believed" but could not prove a substantial dropout rate. Of deeper concern to him was the unknown loss of so many individuals.

The 30% dropout figure for the 1981-85 file was computed only after lenghty crosschecking of 160 missing students. Ultimately, we accounted for all but 41 pupils. Still, the majority of these cases represented school neglect during that period.

It would be too easy and glib to blame school administrators. True,

other districts have developed more effective ways to locate long term absentees. We shall discuss these shortly. But even in those districts, Hispanics and other minorities are more likely to be placed on the "inactive list." School officials in large cities often do not have or do not fully utilize available resources to identify and personally contact the parents of absent students. These conclusions are derived from our interviews to which we now turn.

Obstacles to high school graduation begin the day of registration. Typically, students fill in a course schedule in the Spring of eighth grade. During the ensuing months, especially over the summer vacation, there will be considerable in and out migration of families. For example, Northern High expected a total of 1800 pupils, the majority of them Hispanic, to appear at its doors in September 1985. When the first day of school arrived, 200 did not show up. Meanwhile, 150 unexpected pupils appeared. Similar results occurred at Urbana.

How are the incoming eighth graders and transferees received? Language minority youth at Urbana are supposed to be referred by the central office to the Bilingual office. However, the Bilingual Director indicated that this policy was not always implemented. Sometimes, students were "dumped into standard classes without testing their level of English proficiency."

Centralized registration at Northern includes referral and testing of all individuals with English as a second language. With 100 Spanish speaking teachers and tutors (and approximately 75 aides) in grades K-12, Northern's school district provides many more learning opportunities than Urbana's much smaller program.

Northern High's Bilingual students are partially mainstreamed. They may

take one or two courses in Spanish, e.g. math and science. Class size, however, may be large (e.g. 30), especially in basic classes. The Bilingual Director made it clear that a shortage of space was keeping classes so high.

Prolonged unexcused absenteeism, defined as ten or more consecutive days, is treated differently at the two schools. A House master at Urbana is supposed to contact the home of absent students. But, he will not reach them if the family has moved, parents are working, or no one can speak English. Follow-up attempts through the city's attendance officer is sporadic and unreliable.

Northern High has instituted a more formal mechanism. Parent aids during the day and teachers at night telephone excessively absent students (A Spanish speaking, parent liason now performs this function at the elementary schools in this district.). The attendance officer is regularly given a list of non-attending students under 16 years of age. If necessary, he will notify welfare agencies and the courts about truant minors.

Yet, more than 10% of Northern's students withdrew between September 1985 and February 1986. Why ? According to administrative entries on student records, 63% "left to seek employment" while 33% were placed on an inactive list - reason unknown or awaiting follow-up contact by attendance officer. Five school-related reasons dealing with grades, curriculum, and relationships with teachers/peers were acknowledged for only 8 dropouts.

The figures at Urbana are equally one-sided with 72% seeking employment and 22% unknown. These figures do not include the 160 unclassified non-attending students.

Interestingly enough an equal number of boys and girls withdrew from school. Reported pregnancy or marriage was listed for only 4 Urbana dropouts.

Obviously, shortcomings in administrative reporting of withdrawals may be distorting these data.

Although family economic deprivation probably prompted many boys and girls to seek a job, we are reluctant to discount the hypothesized school-related relationships. Wehlage and Rutter (1985 :11-12) point out in their assessment of the Rumberger (1983) study: "It is not clear, however, the extent to which work is seen as a more positive alternative than school and that this response is simpy another way of saying that school is disliked."

More extensive analysis of conditions affecting at-risk students needs to be done. We can expect difficulties when data is partially and inconsistently entered on student files. For example, a guidance conselor reported that an Urbana Hispanic student was absent for 23 days. After she returned to school she bragged that last year she missed 56 days and passed. This occurred despite a clear policy of course failure for excessive absences.

Implications and Conclusions

Data on the numbers and characteristics of school dropouts are frequently unreliable. Large urban schools, e.g. pupil enrollments of 2500+, can be very impersonal places. When someone leaves before graduation, he or she may become simply a "missing" student.

Although Northern High has improved its procedures for "keeping track" of students, mass transiency into and out of the community compounds the effort. Nearly a 100% turnover between kindergarten and 12th grade exists. Such turnover presents serious obstacles to helping students with language or learning difficulties. The problem is compounded by large classes and inadequate space.

One cannot fully explore causes and correlates of "dropping out" when school officials are unaware who has left. Better record keeping is a sine qua non of further research and intervention efforts. During the last two years, centralized registration procedures, parent liasons, and strong central administrative support for bilingual services have helped Northern High do a better job. Much remains to be done.

Low-income communities with large Spanish and Southeast Asian populations are facing growing demands with few financial and physical resources. Unless private industry, state government and federal government jointly and cooperatively help the schools meet such demands, a serious dropout problem will continue. Moreover, the country will have lost a significant number of the educated and skilled workers needed for the 1990's.

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Figure 1. Potential Causes and Correlates of Dropping Out

BACKGROUND	LACK OF BELONGING TO SCHOOL AND ITS MISSION	PRECIPITATORS	DECISION
Family Background Low SES Ethnicity - Hispanic Poor English Proficiency	Instructional Tracking and Low Staff Expectations	Boredom / Disinterest with School	
	Hostile Peer Ties and Norms	Performance: Low GPA Grade Retention Excessive Absences	Dropout before H.S. Graduation
	Lack of Extacurricula Activities		
		Behavior in School: Disruptive or Delinquent	